

Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice

Volume 3

Issue 1 *Discussing the Convergence of Research and the
Creative Arts*

Article 10

Fall 2004

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Recommended Citation

Lack, Linda (2004) "Portals: Primary Experience vs. Translated Experience," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol3/iss1/10>

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Portals: Primary Experience vs. Translated Experience

Linda Lack

The Implications for Aesthetics, Healing, and Creativity in Dance Theater and Movement Dance Therapy

This Arts-Based Research project has been performed across the United States. A video version of the project is available for personal participation or as a learning/teaching tool. It is, of course, only another kind of “translation” of the actual primary/lived experience of the project. Contact Linda Lack at Two Snake Studios, 1637 S. La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, CA, 90035-4509. Telephone (310) 273-4797.

This Arts-Based Research project explores the differences between a primary or “pure” movement experience and that same experience when it is translated or has words wrapped around the movement. It further explores what the differences are between either of those experiences and “true” dance theater with sound and visuals. The research considers and is interested in the difference for both the person creating the artistic project and those receiving the experience - the audience. This exploration is grounded in an attempt to help define what Shaun McNiff has named Art Based Research, where both the concept and practice are still in developmental form, particularly in the field of Dance/Movement. This Arts-Based Research project has been implemented and refined over the last year and will include still photo images. A video version is available for participation or for use as a learning/teaching tool.

I am a dancer/performer/choreographer, an educator, and a healer/movement therapist. I have dedicated fifty-five years to creating movement rituals, an entire technique, and to allying individuals with the art and practice of accessing Self through movement. I re-entered Academia cautiously, making a commitment to myself, my art form, and to a belief that a Ph.D. in Dance should dance, and further, that it should not deteriorate into an exercise in rationalizing why Art – and Dance in particular – is a worthy endeavor in the community of scholarship. In fact, it is a thrilling chapter in the history of both Art and Academia, for Shaun McNiff has named and finally given formal credence to the possibility and reality of Art and Art-making as Research (McNiff, Art-Based Research, 1998).

In doing so, he has liberated minds, helped revolutionize methods of gathering and interpreting information, elevated and validated the role of the working artist in scholarship, and most importantly expanded possibilities for human understanding. Lenore Hervey has echoed all of this and extended an invitation and inclusion –

specifically to choreographers and dancers – by describing and documenting choreography, its process and product, as a research endeavor (Artistic Inquiry in Dance/Movement Therapy, Lenore Wadsworth Hervey, 2000).

This Art-Based Research project was born from an interest in and an attempt to participate in the pioneering work of shaping what Arts-Based Research is; from my own serious concerns for Dance/Movement as its own way of learning, experiencing and knowing; and for its healthy existence in academic environments where words – both written and spoken – are the dominant culture, and thus the “upper class” of that society, with all the attendant privilege, power, etc. This Arts-Based Research project is an advocacy project. It is also an attempt to create understanding and to illuminate, for those who do not spend time involved in the creative process – What is important about Art?

There is a dearth of Arts-Based Research in the discipline of Dance. Most of the work that exists either dances and then uses reflective writing to reveal important information about the creative process (Cancienne and Snowber, *Writing Rhythm*, 2003) or poses a question. The “answers” gathered are movement-based and they are the basis for culmination in a creative product (Hervey, 2000, pp. 95-109).

In an attempt to contribute to and expand the scope of Arts-Based Research, I decided to allow the methodology, design, and pedagogy itself to be a creative process, unencumbered by already-existing formulae yet faithful to general guidelines. Within the confines of this journal I will share the etiology and evolution of my approach, the journey toward the design, the design itself, and the results of this piece of Arts-Based Research that continues to work well and hold interest for those participating.

I have never made Art or Dance. I have placed myself in my studio (or in the wilderness for wilderness rituals) and allowed myself to wander, stumble, thrash, fly and wonder at it all. What was The Dance was passed through me and revealed through the act of immersing Self in movement, breath, and in the present-time moment of physical, emotional, spiritual awareness and being. I have always trusted that process (McNiff, *Trust the Process*, 1998).

I did the same with this Arts-Based Research: I allowed myself to be immersed in the utter discomfort – a very universal discomfort, frustration, and sometimes even distaste, of the Artist, when required to explain, define, or put words to Art:

The only valid thing in Art is the one thing that cannot be explained. To explain away the mystery of a great painting would do irreplaceable harm, for whenever you explain or define something you substitute the explanation or definition for the image of the thing.

–Henri Matisse

I spent movement/studio time wondering about the dichotomy between the lived or primary experience of Dance and the worded and written world of Academia in which I had also immersed myself. I decided to “turn in” a dance instead of an assigned paper for an important Ph.D. seminar. I tore up seven blank pages; I performed the piece. It was a bold exploration of the effect and responses I would have from both faculty and seminar participants. I intended it less as a political statement, more to make the point that Dance is a language of its own. I had unanimous acceptance for my “paper,” profound understanding for the point I was making, and the most difficult, strange, un-graced dance I had ever created in a lifetime of making dance. I sustained the only serious performance-related injury of my career while presenting it.

Somewhere in this process of stumbling through the wilderness and floating at the outer edges of Arts-Based Research, a generous and wise faculty member, Don Shapiro, suggested that I look at the moment when humans begin to speak.

It is a moment when there is a schism within Self, a schism between lived/primary experience and translated experience. Here may be the schism between Body and Mind. There are dramatic and profound losses when words are born and we become estranged from primary experience and our important ability to access it. At first glance language appears to be a straightforward advantage for the augmentation of interpersonal experience... But in fact language is a double-edged sword. It also makes some parts of our experience less shareable with ourselves and with others. It drives a wedge between two simultaneous forms of interpersonal experience: as it is lived and as it is verbally represented. (Stern, p.16)

I maintain that that loss is not necessary, that it is the Artist who can exist in both worlds, who can help connect and reconnect others to the world of primary experience, who can mine this particular source of natural human wealth and information.

How then could I portray this information, understanding, and my concern for what I see as the minimization, disinterest and indifference to primary experience that is surely the basis of making and receiving Art?

I have created a piece of Arts-Based Research that addresses these issues and for many provides re-entry into the lost practice of primary/lived experience. There are three sections: The first is fifteen minutes of pure movement in silence except for the sound of physical grunts, breath, spit and sweat that comes from the physical labor of passion and angst. The movement material is partly autobiographical, with attention to that which is universal to most artists; it is political, emotional, physical, and sometimes endeavors to portray the spiritual. The second section is a rerun of the exact same movement with words wrapped around it. It “Explains” what was happening in the first section. The third section is an excerpt from a mask-dance drama and ritual that authentically represents what I consider to be my Art. Like the first section, it is lived/primary experience.

This piece of Arts-Based Research is a fifty-minute solo that took six months to create and three to “live inside of,” as dancers say. Before the piece begins I explain what I am going to do and how the three separate sections will follow one another. I ask each person to try to remain present with me, physically and emotionally, as I move. I pose the question: “What is the difference, for you, between the primary experience and the translated or worded experience???”

At the end of the piece everyone is invited to “answer” or respond in any and all ways they choose – movement, silence, drawing, speaking, noise-making – anything. At this writing, the piece has been performed five times, for a spectrum of people ranging from those with little Art exposure or experience to high-level functioning artists.

I am deeply grateful, and of course it is satisfying that the piece is received by so many as an interesting piece of choreography and a fine performance, for I believe that it is important that Arts-Based Research endeavors to maintain similar aesthetic and quality levels as Art that is presented to audiences. However, it is the personal and individual responses and what we are learning – all of us who have been involved in this research – that are in fact the point. Reactions to the piece are surprising, stunning, often passionately intense; and usually wonderful art is made. The piece has also created forums for important reflective discussions that go on for months after a showing of the piece. It would be impossible to share, within the confines of this small article, the totality of what we have gleaned from the project, but some of what has emerged is the following.

Art, the creative process, is a primary/lived experience. Certainly the making of Art is, and I believe that most artists hope that the receiver, audience, viewer of a work of Art is engaged in primary/lived experience while participating with that which is made. During the shaping of this Arts-Based Research I learned that I could not dance thoroughly or authentically from a “lived” place while trying to speak at the same time. I could not really live, dance and translate simultaneously; I could make

primitive noises and body-based noises, but it was not possible to produce communicative language as I know it while I moved. Given that fact, I recorded my own voice and words and danced to them in the second section. Still, I was not able to live inside the moment of embodied experience, for language, my own voice, translations, definitions and concepts actually yanked me away from primary experience. At that point in the process I realized why the piece was not what dance-theater and ritual are truly about – I had initiated the piece knowing that I would wrap words, sentences, language/ideas around the movement; that presupposes that I was already dwelling in the land of translation. The intent, phrasing, emotion – even composition – of a piece of choreography does not have a subject or verb, a period at the end of a sentence or thought. The beat of the heart, the rhythm of breath, the cadence of a human being's body physically lifting and falling, the contraction and release of muscles, the exquisite joy of flying from and falling back to earth are primary/lived events, and it is actually impossible to construct the multi-dimensional layers of primary experience into sentences, paragraphs, words written or spoken. The piece is a tough and demanding performance experience, but what is really interesting is that the possibilities for injury are always greatest in the worded section. I must work to remain in true lived experience while hearing my own voice. The disease and dis-grace of the worded section prompted the inclusion of the masked dance ritual – no worded, languaged, theoretical experiences went into the making of or goes into the performance of this section. It is what Dance Art, or at least Art that is most satisfying, is for me.

It is interesting that the folks who participate, immersing themselves in this project, also feel that the third section is what speaks to them and moves them most deeply; and responses are always very primary – howling, weeping, utter silence or simple, poignant gestures of appreciation. It is very rare for anyone to address the question. Instead, for most people the piece seems to function as a portal or opening into accessing primary experience – it evidently gives permission to the viewers or participants to delve into their own lived experience and to remain there, both when watching the piece and in responding or replying to it. The worded, sentenced question becomes irrelevant and pales in relationship to the need to express, celebrate, share, participate and remain in primary experience.

Poetry, intricate paper sculpture, drawings and dances are made. Art is a language of its own and most people respond in the language of Art. This project lends support to a new current of thinking: Art should be taught and experienced in its own tongue, certainly not in a detached and foreign one (Kimball, *Four Quarters of the Earth*, 2004). I wholeheartedly agree.

Each time the piece is shown there are people who access and bring to conscious awareness what seems to be important “Self” information and they are willing to

dance it, show it, shout it. There are cathartic experiences triggered by the piece and its non-verbal statement that primary experience is worthy, useful and important human experience. The piece seems to give access to and permission for expression of important Self information that would otherwise be ignored. Some of the responses are dramatic self-realizations and epiphanies, while others are simple but meaningful statements. “thank you for showing me how beautiful I am” (Lossi, 2003). These kinds of responses support what we know, that primary/lived experience – Art – is wonderfully useful in therapeutic, developmental and healing work (McNiff, *Art as Medicine*, 1992).

Yet another thematic group of responses falls into the category of education (both learning and teaching) and curriculum research. They are epitomized by the following message: “I am in a field not related to arts-based research, but the presentation was for me a ... consciousness – changing experience because it taught me more about how to approach my own research with openness to the 'Essence of the truth in the data' and with more creativity” (Williams, 2003). Each showing of the project produces multiple suggestions that the piece should be experienced by students and faculty of Art and Communication departments; by communities exploring interdisciplinarity; and by policy makers inside and outside of Academia.

Lastly, but most compelling and deeply satisfying for me personally, is that this Arts-Based Research project proves over and over to be a channel into accessing how to approach, enjoy, understand, and embrace the experiences of both making and receiving Art.

“In a short fifty minutes we access aesthetic understanding...the impact is primary ... this 'aha' is an opening for new understanding of both self and other, of epistemology, complexity, silence, layering...” (Kimball, 2003). Or the scientist who, after experiencing the piece, stated that she would never sit in a dance concert again without “participating.” The varying forms of thanks the piece has received remind me that Art is a gift – a gift we give ourselves when we make Art, a gift we give to others who receive it.

This project began as an exploration of Arts-Based Research in the field of Dance and as a celebration of Art and Dance; it began as an attempt to underscore what is important, for everyone participating, about the act of making Art. It evolved into a tool for accessing primary/lived experience, for deepening our understanding about our capacity for, and the value of, primary experience that is the stuff of Art and the creative process. Society at large and Academia in particular do not encourage, foster, nurture, or even offer many experiences in primary/lived experience. That neglect of an important part of human experience distances us from a valuable part of our humanity. Participation in the land of primary/lived experience offers wonderful and

expanded possibilities for information that in turn have profound implications for individual self-knowledge, education, aesthetics and healing.

To practice art is to enter into something dubious. Dubious in the sense that either fragments of the universe have fallen at your feet and you must make something of them, or numerous haphazard elements have been given to you by other people called artists and you must now reinterpret them...realize the scope of these thoughts by presenting art simply as a thing to be practiced rather than studied. Ed Ruscha (2003)

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